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AUTHOR Shields, James J.
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ABSTRACT

Scholars and educational policymakers are interested in identifying successful national school systems that might provide effective models of educational theory and practice for transfer to other nations. U.S. educators have been interested in the success Japan has had in a broad range of measures of academic achievement and school participation rates. This paper takes a comprehensive look at Japanese schools by defining their characteristics and comparing strengths and weaknesses of both U.S. and Japanese school systems. (BT)

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Teachers College, Columbia University
The Center for Educational Outreach and Innovation
Box 132
New York, New York 10027

*Japanese and United States Schooling: A Comparative Perspective**

James J. Shields

There is a great deal of interest among scholars and educational policy makers in identifying successful national school systems that might provide effective and transferable models of educational theory and practice for transfer to other nations.

Over the last decade, US educators have been looking at Japanese schooling for possible solutions to the problems that concern them such as: low levels of academic achievement; growing violence and drug use in junior and senior high schools; the challenges to cultural cohesiveness related to the migration of people from all over the world and the breakdown in earlier patterns of family life.

US educators have been especially interested in the success Japan has had in a broad range of measures of academic achievement and school participation rates. Japan excels in every international standard up to the age of 17, both for their top students and for all categories of students who graduate from high school. Moreover, Japan has the highest percentage of students who graduate from high school. In contrast, the US has attained a relatively modest record in these areas.

Many trace Japan's impressive record of academic achievement to its integrated pattern of socializing the young in the family, the community, and the school. Japanese families are expected to be united in their mutually respected roles of nurturing values related to academic achievement including: disciplined work habits, cooperative attitudes, strict adherence to rules, loyalty, persistent effort, group identification and intense commitment of mothers to their children's success in schools.

However, a closer and more comprehensive look at Japanese schools reveals that there are very serious weaknesses, as well as strengths. This becomes clearer, as broader and more complex educational purposes are considered which go beyond academic achievement and community cohesion alone to include aims related to equality of educational opportunity and individual freedom and creativity.

What follows is an outline of the comparative strengths and weaknesses of Japanese and US schooling based on this expanded, multidimensional perspective on educational purposes.

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* Lecture prepared for on-line, interactive dialogue among Japanese and United States high school teachers participating in The City College, City University of New York, Center for School Development SCHOOL-LINK PROJECT funded by the US-Japan Foundation, July 1998. The website location is schoollink.org.

JAPANESE SCHOOLING

A. Major Defining Characteristics

1. High levels of academic achievement relative to Western industrialized nations on international standardized tests.

2. Very active role played by mothers in supporting the social and the academic goals and practices of schools.

3. In pre- and elementary schooling, the social, emotional and moral engagement of pupils with their teachers and peers given precedence over academic goals. This is facilitated by a strong emphasis on clear, concise, and consistent rules covering all aspects of school life.

4. Emphasis placed on effort (*gambaru*) and little attention paid to concepts of I.Q. and innate ability.

5. Whole class instruction in elementary schools punctuated by periods of noisy, exuberant free-play; frequent use of mixed ability groups of 4 to 8 pupils; and critical self-reflection sessions (*hansei*) focused on norms such as cooperation, sensitivity and empathy to involve pupils in classroom management, enforcing discipline and mutual teaching and learning.

6. Drastic shift in middle schools to rote learning, individual work, intense discipline and discomfort which is seen as necessary, developmentally, for adolescents to navigate successfully to adulthood.

7. Teachers are seen as important moral guides, are highly respected and are paid salaries comparable to other professionals. On the average, there are 5 applicants for each teaching position.

8. Tremendous financial expenditures by parents of non-public, supplemental schooling, especially of after-school tutoring centers (*juku*) and private high schools and universities.

9. Highly centralized, national control of schooling over textbooks, curriculum, standards, school organization, pupil behavior and finances to assure equality of resources and standards and a unified national identity.

10. Meritocratic, university examination system with hierarchically ranked institutions supported by the hiring practices of major corporations and the government.

B. Characteristics Viewed As Negative by Foreign Observers

1. Stress on academic achievement in upper levels of schooling which has narrowed focus of schooling to meeting demands required to pass university admissions examinations.

2. Overly indulgent mothers who dote on and spoil children which tends to create overly dependent children.

3. Stress on formalism and conformism which stifles creativity and the capacity for autonomous thinking.

4. Emphasis on effort which often results in failure to detect children with special physical, emotional and cognitive needs and to provide for these needs in the early school years. Also, it tends to create tense and workaholic people.

5. Use of group pressure to enforce classroom discipline sometimes leads to bullying (*ijime*), often with the teacher's tacit consent; lack of tolerance for diversity; weak commitment to individual rights; and overemphasis on socialization for "correct" emotions such as cheerfulness, harmony and exuberance.

6. Emphasis on rigor and hardship on the secondary levels stifles social and emotional growth and the nurturing of the full range of multiple intelligences in children.

7. Widespread utilization of private, fee-based schooling requires great financial sacrifice by many parents, grants privileges to more affluent parents; and contributes to the educational inequality especially among minorities and the poor.

8. Excessive government control of curriculum, standards and regulations leads to conformism, "simultaneous-ism" (*issei-shugi*) and severe limits on teacher and student freedom.

9. Overemphasis on examinations encourages cramming of facts, a "one right answer" approach to learning, competitiveness and credentialism.

10. The generally academically weak undergraduate college system and limited post-graduate university system which draws heavily on overseas graduate schools for advanced studies.

UNITED STATES SCHOOLING

Strengths and Weaknesses

1. Overall, average to below average levels of academic achievement on international standardized tests by elementary and secondary students.

2. Largely limited and often adversarial role played by parents in their relationships with teachers and schools.

3. Societal reform and custodial goals of schooling given precedence over social, emotional and moral development goals.

4. Larger and larger percentages of school budgets directed to needs of "special" students to the detriment of average and gifted students.

5. Emphasis on ability over effort and on defining students' possibilities for academic achievement based on standardized testing and labeling of students, "slow," "average," "gifted" and "special."

6. Great value placed on teaching practices which stress quiet classrooms, ability tracking, pupil competition, individualism and self-expression.

7. Relatively experiential, self-contained elementary classrooms give way in middle schools to more subject-centered, lecture-recitation based approach and the view that adolescents are in a crisis stage and need to be indulged.

8. Teachers are less respected than those in other professions and are relatively poorly paid. Shortage of qualified teacher applicants especially in urban areas and in the sciences and mathematics.

9. Parents' educational ambitions for their children largely are placed in public schools.

10. Control and financing of schooling decentralized on state level and shared with local boards representing parent and community interests. While this enables local interests to influence educational policy, it has resulted in great inequalities in school financing and other resources.

11. Generally open undergraduate university admissions allows individuals who have done poorly on lower levels of schooling to improve their life chances. Increased rigor of college curriculum helps many to make up for their weak high school education, especially for minority and lower class students.

12. Graduate education ranked highest in world and considered an important factor in contributing to the US economic and cultural dominance in world today.

In conclusion, there is much that is impressive about Japanese schooling, especially in the area of academic achievement. However, when the context in which school purpose is expanded to include other measures rooted in such ideals as: equality, freedom and community cohesion, deep fissures become apparent in Japanese schooling which call for reform strategies that move beyond mere rhetoric.

When this more comprehensive perspective is used, it becomes clear that even though there are many differences between schooling in the United States and Japan schools, both systems share common foundational challenges, which can be encapsulated in the question:

> *How can schools contribute to the maximization of each student's individual potential, while also preparing each student to become a responsible citizen on the local, national and global levels?*